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Conversations on Clitoridectomy across Borders

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An Encounter in Paris – Conversations on Clitoridectomy across Borders

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Abstract

This essay describes how a controversy over clitoridectomy came to influence the conjuncture of imperial politics and nationalist resistance between Kenya and Great Britain the 1930s. Clitoridectomy was a key component of the initiation rites of leading population groups in Kenya. Missionaries and medical doctors opposed it on moral and health grounds, African men and some women defended it a precondition of mature and responsible adulthood. An unlikely meeting and collaboration between a group of people – Marie Bonaparte, Jomo Kenyatta, Bronislaw Malinowski and Prince Peter – who had a keen interest in the issue, generated new insights into the roots of tradition, how it fitted into not only structures of the human psyche but also the social structure of so-called traditional societies. The essay discusses what led to the collaboration, traces its consequences and situates the clitoridectomy controversy in the context of anti-colonial and female emancipation.

1 In the spring of 1935, the park of the Versailles in Paris was the site of an unusual encounter. The two participants were the well-known French writer and psychoanalyst Princess Marie Bonaparte and an African from Kenya Colony, Jomo Kenyatta. She was a descendant of Napoleon Bonaparte, married to a Prince of Greece and Denmark. He was the son of peasants, a leader of African resistance and an outspoken critic of European colonialism.

2 The topic of their conversation was clitoridectomy as it was practiced in Eastern Africa. Bonaparte was in her fifties, at the height of her career as a writer, leading a rich and complicated personal and professional life between London, Vienna, Athens, and Copenhagen. Kenyatta was twenty years younger, at the beginning of his, still unknown in Europe, but thirty years later destined to become the first President of independent Kenya. He arrived at the rendezvous from London, where he had been sent as a representative of his people, the Africans of Kenya Colony. Here, at the heart of the waning empire, one of his assignments turned out to be to give expert witness to the British medical establishment on clitoridectomy (Murray-Brown 35).

3 At this time, the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who was a friend and soul mate of Bonaparte's, conducted a prestigious and well-attended seminar on "Culture Contact in Africa" at London School of Economics (LSE) (Berman and Lonsdale). Among the participants were Kenyatta and a young student of law and anthropology, Prince Peter, the son of Marie Bonaparte. She was deeply involved in a psychoanalytical study of female sexuality. She let Malinowski know that she would be keen to discuss the question of the

influence of clitoridectomy on the sexual lives of African women with his mature student, Jomo Kenyatta. Prince Peter and Malinowski set up the meeting.

4 The idea of this essay on the historical context of clitoridectomy, as it was practiced and debated in what is now Kenya and in Europe, is to show the way that ideas flowed between the colonial and the colonized world – the Western and non-Western – and the way that ideas from what was then colonies on their way to independence sometimes challenged the received wisdom of the West.¹ The 1920s and 30s were the decades of the breakthrough of both anthropology and psychoanalysis. One of the ideas that were debated between these disciplines was that of the mental and civilizational capabilities of colonized people, in Africa and elsewhere – those peoples who had not benefitted from European enlightenment and development. Theories that non-Whites had less developed personalities and intellectual capacities as a result of stagnant traditional cultures were bolstered by ideologues and leading scientists but fiercely resisted by African intellectuals and members of the anti-colonial resistance. For some, the practice of clitoridectomy was a symbol of backwardness, for others it was a sign of a functioning society in which cultural practices contributed to harmony between genders and generations. The latter view lent itself to the functionalist anthropology of Malinowski.

5 I want to demonstrate how the academic disciplines of anthropology and psychoanalysis were centrally involved in defining the terms of the debate between proponents and antagonists of the practice of clitoridectomy, and the broader question of its role in the evolution of a society on its way from tradition to modernity. The sketches of the personalities and contexts of the protagonists of the essay, Bonaparte, Malinowski, Kenyatta and Prince Peter, and the description of the strong links between them are meant to illustrate the significance of the actions of living and thinking human beings in the unfolding of social and intellectual history. Ideas flow across borders, but their inflections are marked by those who articulate them, and their influence on events reflects the power behind their articulation.

6 The four participants and enablers of the Paris encounter were all in different ways implicated in the whirlwinds of social and political reform that swept over Europe and (some) dependent regions in the 1930s. The coincidence of a concern in Great Britain among politicians and pressure groups with the way that female circumcision, a savage custom, was being perpetuated in Kenya, and the presence in London of a spokesman for the colonized, Jomo Kenyatta, who influenced and was under the influence of Malinowski, led to an

¹ This essay is a reworked version of an earlier article, "Jomo Kenyatta, Marie Bonaparte and Bronislaw Malinowski on Clitoridectomy and Female Sexuality", *History Workshop Journal* Issue 65, Spring 2008, pp. 23-49, reprinted in Clark 2011.

entanglement of psychoanalytical and anthropological analysis and theoretical work with feminist activism and anti-colonial political protest.

7 Clitoridectomy, or female circumcision, as the practice was more commonly known, was the question that fuelled the encounter between Bonaparte and Kenyatta. Her preoccupation was the relationship between the modeling of the clitoris and the sites of female sexuality and libido. In addition to Bonaparte's scientific interest in the issue, her interest was personal and political: she sought enlightenment and liberation for women whom she thought to be in the thralldom of patriarchy to the detriment of the full unfolding of their sexuality. She considered herself as one of the victims. Kenyatta's concern was the role the ritual played in the cultural life and politics of identity of his tribe, the Kikuyu. He also had a strong wish to rectify what he saw as prejudiced European ideas about the ritual of female initiation, of which clitoridectomy was a central part.

8 Kenyatta, who had risen to prominence through his political work in a male-dominated environment, did not question patriarchy. To him, the urgency of the problematic of clitoridectomy was entirely different. He was in the middle of a struggle that played itself out both in Kenya and in Great Britain. On the one hand, for the Kikuyu, who practiced female circumcision as part of an initiation into adulthood, its upholding became a key point of resistance against interference from the colonial regime. On the other hand, the colonial regime, and particularly missionaries and some influential feminists, wanted it done away with because of its harmful effects on women's lives and health, and on the health of the population – those communities that practiced clitoridectomy. The concern was one of social hygiene, bordering on eugenics, and in tune with contemporary sexual reform, as demonstrated by the introduction of clinics providing advice on marriage and sexuality, particularly the popular Marie Stopes clinics.

9 The contestation over the meaning and effects of clitoridectomy became central to uprisings in Kenya against British dominance and paternalism in the 1930s. It led to the establishment by the Kikuyu ethnic group of independent schools and churches that endorsed female circumcision and other traditional practices. It also provided an opening for interventions into the African cultural nationalist resistance by the British colonial regime. Protestant missionaries and proponents of female emancipation in Britain, particularly members of the "Committee for the Protection of Coloured Women in the Protectorate", led by the militant feminist Eleanor Rathbone, condemned the practice and demanded, unsuccessfully, as it turned out, that it be abolished (Pedersen; Boddy Chapter 9).

10 In 1930 the Kikuyu had sent Kenyatta to London as a spokesman of his people to protest to the colonial administration against the land alienation that was the result of the British colonial conquest, particularly in what became known as the White Highlands, and to demand that the land be given back to African cultivators. Resistance against the theft of land underlay the entire colonial period and reemerged as a driving force behind the anti-colonial uprising in Kenya, known as the Mau Mau.

11 Kenyatta's mission to the imperial capital was a sign of his standing as a representative of the interests of his people. He was well received in London by intellectuals and politicians related to the Labour Party, and parties to the left of the Labour Party, and tolerated by representatives of the government. He pleaded his cause in speeches, articles, and meetings with left-wing organizations, officials, and members of Parliament. He also had conversations with Thomas Shiels, a medical doctor and Undersecretary of State at the Colonial Office, as an expert on clitoridectomy (Murray-Brown 35). In the early 1930s, however, the protest campaign had run out of steam and money, and Kenyatta found himself stranded in London. Aided by Malinowski and other friends, he reinvented himself as an informant on the Kikuyu language and as a student of anthropology, arming himself academically to continue the political fight with the British on equal ground.

12 Bonaparte made the encounter in Paris happen. Like Kenyatta's, her way into the academic life was unorthodox. As a young woman she wanted to be admitted to the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, she wished to penetrate "the hermetic secrets of the internal structures of the human body" (my transl.)², but as a child of extreme privilege, her education had been looked after by private tutors, and she lacked the formal qualifications needed to enter university (Bonaparte 1953b 939). She was the daughter of Prince Roland Bonaparte, a descendant of one of Napoleon's brothers. Her mother, an heiress, died in childbirth, and Marie was brought up by her strict grandmother and a distant father, who was a geographer and anthropologist. Early on, Marie fled into the world of literature. Writing was her phallic activity, as she later expressed it (Bertin, Appignanesi and Forrester 330; Thompson).

13 At the time of the meeting, Bonaparte had published a considerable body of self-biographical, essayistic and philosophical works. In her thirst for knowledge, she now devoted her immense energy to psychoanalysis. One of her major works from this period is a three-volume psychoanalytical analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's life and works. In the second half of the 1920s, she had undergone psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud in Vienna, and she was now preoccupied with fundamental psychoanalytical questions like the women's

² 'les secrets hermétiques de la structure interne du corps humaine',

bisexuality, the source and nature of female sexuality, and the universality of the Oedipus complex. Malinowski, her son's teacher, shared her interests. In his monograph that was the outcome of his fieldwork in Melanesia, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, he explored whether the gender identities and psychology he observed among the Trobrianders had developed along the lines of the Oedipal complex.

14 Bonaparte's thesis was that women in the western world had increasingly become alienated from their sexuality. The Oedipal processes had taken the wrong course because of the extreme control and suppression of women's sexual pleasure in childhood, particularly the ban on masturbation (Thompson). According to Freudian theory, the site of libido is transferred from the clitoris to the vagina with adult women. The clitoris is a vestige of the male sexual organ. For large numbers of women in the West, this transfer has not occurred, according to Bonaparte, they suffer from *clitoridism* in her words and cannot attain a satisfactory love life. In Europe, Bonaparte experienced what she considered an epidemic of female frigidity that she attributed to the fundamental bisexual nature of women, which impaired the transfer of the site of sexual pleasure, a process that resulted in women becoming increasingly masculine (Bonaparte 1950, Thompson 357).

15 Bonaparte was a true experimental scientist. She herself became her case. She regarded herself as frigid, and in the early 1930s underwent several operations whose purpose was to transplant the clitoris to a point closer to the vagina to enhance sexual sensations (Bertin 141; Bourgeron 23-4). This surgical intervention was known as Halban-Narjani operation. The interventions were unsuccessful, and later in her career, she concluded that the surgical intervention was "pre-analytical and erroneous": "Psycho-analysis ... will be a surer and more elegant solution to such disturbances of instinct" (Bonaparte 1953a 50-2; Bourgeron 23-4, 49-51).

16 Marie Bonaparte was married to the Danish Prince Georg of Greece and Denmark. They had two children. Their son, Prince Peter, became a recognized anthropologist. He worked in continuation of his mother's interests, an aspect of which was a study of polyandry. Princess Marie and Prince George lived in free marriage; both had love relations outside the marriage. Prince George had very close relations with his ten years older uncle, Prince Valdemar, who accompanied the newly-wed on their honeymoon. Marie had several lovers, one being the prominent French socialist and internationalist, Aristide Briant. Princess Marie and Prince George were active members of the transnational Danish royal family who met for holidays and reunions at the castle Lille Bernsdorff, close to Copenhagen (Kristensen).

17 What has all this to do with the African nationalist and student of anthropology, Jomo Kenyatta? Like Malinowski, Bonaparte, and Prince Peter, Kenyatta was part of a transnational, progressive milieu, in his case one that included students, aspiring politicians, and writers from the European colonies – Ghana, Nigeria, the Caribbean – and their British supporters, colleagues, and partners in dialogue. Several groups in this political and intellectual environment worked towards the end of European colonialism, and many took part in Malinowski's seminar. The seminar had a strong representation from East Africa: apart from Kenyatta, the settler writer Elspeth Huxley, and the archeologist and anthropologist Louis Leakey, another white Kenyan who was an archeologist and anthropologist, fluent in Kikuyu, and Kenyatta's rival and evil spirit (Berman and Lonsdale 1991).

18 Kenyatta studied for the Anthropological Diploma at LSE. As part of the program, he presented a paper dealing with girls' initiation rites among the Kikuyu of Kenya. Here he showed material that later became the substance of the chapters on "Initiation of Boys and Girls" and "Sex Life Among Young People" in his monograph on the culture of the Kikuyu, *Facing Mount Kenya. The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*. Prince Peter was present and took notes, as did Malinowski.

19 This academic event was of the utmost interest to Marie Bonaparte. In the chapters of *Female Sexuality* and her essay, "Notes on Excision", she presented her theory on female sexuality and the role of the clitoridectomy (1950)³. According to Freud, clitoridectomy contributed to the feminization of women. The purpose of the surgical intervention that had been known from the period of Egyptian antiquity onwards was to move the site of sexual pleasure from the clitoris to the vagina. Experimentally, Bonaparte went along with this thesis and added an anthropological reflection. In "Notes on Excision", she wrote:

I think that the ritual sexual mutilation imposed on women of some African tribes since time immemorial, - (Cleopatra herself must have been excised!) – constitute the exact physical counterpart of the psychic intimidations imposed in childhood on the sexuality of little girls of European races, and I think that from the point of view of the final sexuality of the women, they produce the same results. With the progressive introjection of the external persons of authority surrounding the child, with the corresponding strengthening of the superego or conscience, less physical coercion seems necessary than in more primitive times when the archaic instincts of humanity were stronger and more difficult to curb. The same results which were formerly obtained by physical violence are then secured by psychic intimidation.⁴

³ A footnote to the French version of the essay, "Notes sur l'excision", informs that Bonaparte wrote it in French in 1941-2, Bonaparte 1952, 107.

⁴ (Bonaparte 1950 78).

To investigate her ideas of the suppression and censoring of female sexuality that was predominant in the Western world, she needed informants among women whose clitoris had been excised to find out whether they had been 'better vaginalized' than their European sisters, as she expressed it. Female circumcision was prevalent among Kenyatta's people, the Kikuyu. He was to be her informant.

20 The Kikuyu were the ethnic group that caused endless problems for the British colonial government. They lived and owned land in areas close to the capital Nairobi and the White Highlands. Around 1930, the controversy over clitoridectomy between Scottish missionaries and Kikuyu-led political organizations led to a radical break between the colonial regime and its subjects, which meant that the Kikuyu rejected British reform initiatives and established their schools and religious and political organizations.⁵ Throughout the 1930s, and more violently after the WWII, resistance kept growing and led to the famous Mau Mau revolt against the British colonial regime from 1952 to 1960. Resistance against British representations and understandings of the role of clitoridectomy in African culture and the reform interventions they attempted were thus a contributing reason for the anti-colonial opposition.

21 According to Kenyatta, as laid out in his seminar paper at LSE and elaborated in *Facing Mount Kenya*, circumcision of both boys and girls was a necessary and positive step towards the maturity, self-restraint and the discipline of adulthood. The transition from childhood to maturity would not be complete without the ordeal of circumcision. Kikuyu society, as described by Kenyatta in his monograph, was strongly patriarchal, and it is unlikely that women had any influence on the operation. In his work, Kenyatta described the elderly women who were in charge of the intervention, jokingly, as Harley Street surgeons, and in his detailed description of the procedure of the cutting and its context, he underplayed the pain that girls underwent during and after the operation. Bonaparte was skeptical and, half-jokingly suspected the elderly women who operated finding satisfaction in mutilating the young girls who were destined to replace them as objects of men's love. She also took issue with the notion that clitoridectomy was beneficial to childbirth, which Kenyatta had maintained, arguing that the British medical skepticism of the practice could be attributed the fact that doctors saw only the cases that had gone wrong (Frederiksen 38).

22 Encouraged by Bonaparte, Malinowski had studied female circumcision on his African journey in 1934-5. He wrote to her from a stay with the Maasai in East Africa,

⁵ There is an extensive literature on the crisis over clitoridectomy as it unfolded in Great Britain and Kenya. For an overview see Lonsdale 2002, 54-5.

I am at last with people who do practice clitoridectomy and are very keen on it I have had excellent informants ... both male and female and mindful of your instructions not to miss any opportunity of studying this subject, I have worked on it pretty fully.⁶

What he found was that the intervention changes young men and women into “something more complete, *volkommen*, really adult and human.”⁷

23 Malinowski made use of his observations in his anthropology seminars in London, and his formulations are close to those of Kenyatta’s in *Facing Mount Kenya*:

The real argument lies not in the defence of the surgical operation or its details, but in the understanding of a very important fact in the tribal psychology of the Gikuyu, namely that this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has got enormous education, moral, social and religious implication, besides the operation. (Kenyatta 133)

Malinowski and Bonaparte both concluded that the decisive difference in the development of sexuality between adolescents in Europe and non-Europeans, like the Melanesians, commonly considered less developed, was due to the great significance of the latency period in Europe, the period when sexuality was dormant and censored by the Oedipal prohibition. During the latency period, according to Malinowski and Bonaparte, sexuality was internalized as shame, repugnance and intellectual and moral attributes – the qualities that make human beings civilized – thought to be the preconditions for the emergence of culture. Their theory was that in Africa, because of the freer play of sexuality during this period, men and women were less likely to suffer from neuroses and blocked sexuality. Where this was the case, when restrictions on the unfolding of sexuality were less absolute, the price young people paid, was a less developed culture and civilization. The price young people in Europe, particularly young women, may have paid for their tortured but ultimately beneficial latency period was a crippled sexuality.

24 Malinowski had earlier come to this conclusion, as a result of his research on the matrilineal Trobrianders of Melanesia. During the latency period, young Melanesians were allowed to engage in socially sanctioned sexual practices. In Malinowski’s view this was, as he writes, in many ways “culturally destructive”, like the Oedipal taboo, but less threatening: it “helps the gradual and harmonious weaning of the child from family influences” (Malinowski 78). On this point, there was agreement among influential anthropologists and psychoanalysis around 1930. The idea that Africans and other people of color were closer to nature than Europeans corresponded to the dominant ideas and discourses among the political

⁶ LSE Archives MP/Appendix/1, Correspondence with Marie Bonaparte 12 December and 21 August 1934.

⁷ LSE Archives MP/Appendix/1, Correspondence with Marie Bonaparte 12 December and 21 August 1934.

elite, ideas that were deployed to justify the perpetuation of colonial rule. Over the next two decades, the era of decolonization and nationalist movements, this view came to be seen as obsolete.

25 For Bonaparte, the real preoccupation was the origins and site of female libido, and the role that clitoridectomy played as a hindrance or helper of sexual pleasure. In spite of her efforts, she did not manage to get access to more than four or five informants from Europe and North Africa. She did not trust second-hand information, not even that of Malinowski or Kenyatta, as we have seen. On the basis of her research and psychoanalytical insights she reached the preliminary conclusion that if the purpose of clitoridectomy was to stifle the ability of women to experience orgasm, the operation was in vain.

26 Bonaparte was enthusiastic about her meeting with Kenyatta. He spent ten days in Paris as her guest, and after the visit, she wrote to Malinowski in London that Kenyatta was very charming and that the visit had brought her great pleasure.⁸ Unfortunately, there is no report on the encounter with Bonaparte from Kenyatta's hand. A closer examination of his account of female circumcision in *Facing Mount Kenya*, which was published a couple of years after the Paris event, shows how the meeting with an intellectually open milieu in Europe contributed to his understanding of his people. In his preface to the monograph, he also makes clear that as an African anthropologist, close to his people, his analysis of sexuality and its embeddedness in social structures carried greater weight than that of his European colleagues.

27 Undoubtedly, Malinowski also learned from Kenyatta, and, like other leading social scientists he changed his view on the relations between colonizers and colonized. In a letter to Lord Lugard, the Chairman of the International African Institute, in support of a scholarship for Kenyatta to pursue his diploma, Malinowski wrote, "The highly depoliticising influence of scientific anthropology has worked a remarkable change ... another two years of systematic study and the hallmark provided by a Diploma ... and the obligation under which he will feel himself to the Institute will, I am sure, complete the change".⁹ Malinowski's prediction proved wrong. Kenyatta's monograph, *Facing Mount Kenya*, has been recognized as a masterpiece of analysis and propaganda in support of the way of life of highly developed African societies, like that of the Kikuyu. His work, like that of other nationalist intellectuals, helped to turn the tide against European prejudice. When Kenyatta returned to Kenya in 1946, he threw himself into the organizing the ultimately successful political opposition against the British regime.

⁸ LSE Archives MP/Appendix/1, Correspondence with Marie Bonaparte 18 April 1935.

⁹ LSE Archives IAI 629 39/139. 7 December 1936.

28 Struggles surrounding the emancipation of women, and that of colonized peoples were connected, but not in any straightforward manner. In her article on the circumcision controversy as it unfolded in Great Britain, Susan Pedersen remarks that African and European men were likely to have a great deal in common in their fight for the upholding of patriarchy. They made a united front in silencing women's insistence that they, like their male counterparts, had a need of and right to a satisfying sexual life. According to her, this silencing of the clitoris as a site of female pleasure contributed to the toleration of clitoridectomy (Pedersen 664-6).

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¹⁰ Reprinted in Clark, Anna. *The history of sexuality in Europe: a sourcebook and reader*. Routledge, 2011.